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### Truth to visions

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# Truth to Visions

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## Introduction – Seed Crystal

In 1919, the Expressionist *Gläserne Kette* (glass or crystal chain) of architects and artists exchanged visions for advanced utopian societies living harmoniously in crystalline cities. They were led by the prolific architect activist Bruno Taut, who was convinced of the redemptive effects of architecture upon society. His iridescent *Glashaus* (1914) at the 'Werkbund' exhibition in Cologne was a celebrated synthesis of a vision shared with poet Paul Scheerbart, whose novel *Glasarchitektur* was published the same year. Each dedicated their work to the other.<sup>1</sup>

World War I convinced Taut of the necessity of an ideal for the future that was led by the arts, with architecture as the leading plastic art, capable of elevating mankind from further war, revolution, and chaos. Taut's *Alpine Architektur* (1919) portfolio presented luminous drawings of coruscant cathedrals and bridges of glistening glass to provoke a collective vision so awe-inspiring that people would no longer fight. Following critical acclaim for his 'Exhibition for Unknown Architects',<sup>2</sup> Taut asked fourteen like-minded exhibitors to exchange letters and designs for a better society. His first letter to the group proclaims: 'Let us consciously be 'imaginary architects!' We believe that only a total revolution can guide us in our task'.<sup>3</sup>

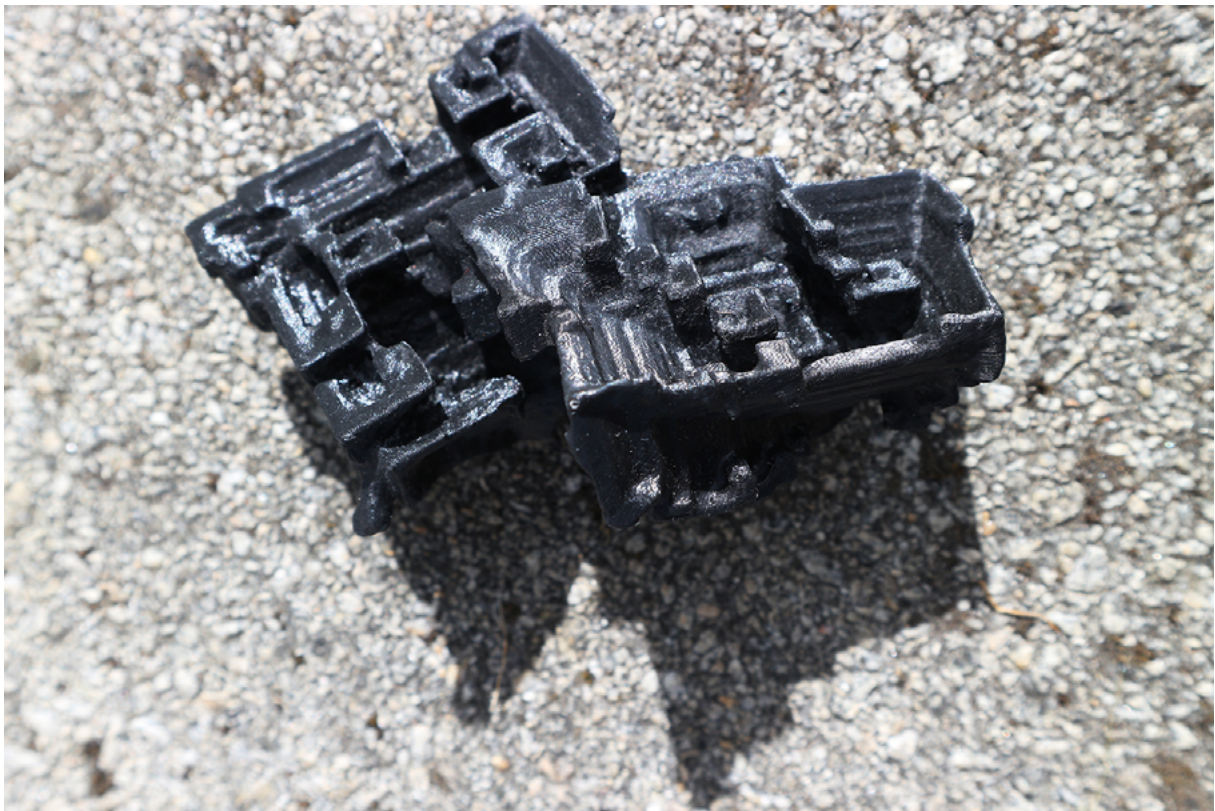
## Crystalline Growth

Throughout the sixty or so letters between the *Gläserne Kette* correspondents are myriad references to spontaneous growth and their aspiration to autogenetic materials. Taut asks: 'Are you looking for the absolute, the building that grows organically?'.<sup>4</sup>

Between them, opinions diverged between those who urged for spontaneous intuitive design, and those inspired by natural growth patterns and the orderly logic of lattices.

Was their architecture buildable? In 1919, the materials and technology for Hermann Finsterlin's biomorphic edifices or Wenzel Hablik's angular accretions were unattainable. Yet, today's spiritual descendants of these 'crystalist' architects create biomimetic explorations in synthetic biology to enable biominerals resembling limestone to be farmed from calcifying bacteria.<sup>5</sup> Could such base morphologies be elevated to Bataille's definition of architecture as *society's ideal nature*?<sup>6</sup>

I have on my table a 3D printout of a bismuth crystal. Its irregular organic form is countered by its plasticky stratified sheen. Removed from the laboratory it becomes an alien object, a meteor from the near future collaged against shabby surroundings. Yet what if it were found in a flea market in 2119, its laminated layers matted with grime or crazed by sunlight? How can we reveal the truth of materials which are so new?



Cath Keay, *bismuth print*, 2016, 10 x 6 cm, 3D print.

## Crystal Core of the Avalanche

These architects sought to transcend the chaos and privations of Germany's defeated, post-revolutionary flux.

The *Gläserne Kette* were named for their reverence for crystalline materials and forms. Their drawings are infused with sparkling, faceted constructions straddling mountains or bursting from the earth; while their writings propound transcendent visions: 'Light bestrides the universe and comes to life in the crystal'.<sup>7</sup>

Crystals encompassed clarity and transparency; natural order and sublime beauty. The Luckhardt brothers' architectural drawings resemble cut gemstones or quartz starbursts, while Wenzel Hablik explored the cubic forms of rocksalt and bismuth's stepped ziggurats. In one letter, Wassily Luckhardt contemplates a crystal in his studio:

In front of me lies a crystal geode that has broken away from the earth's crust...Doesn't one already have the impression here of architectonic creation – don't these structures seem to demand the creating hand of man to shape a meaningful entity out of the chaos of these elemental forms?<sup>8</sup>

While crystals symbolised the ideal, glass offered a tangible solution enabling architects to render sublime crystalline forms as glassy cubic structures associated with the Modernist movement that followed.

'Form is initially an anchoring element, and then becomes the all-embracing crystal, the 'world-building'.<sup>9</sup>



Cath Keay, *bismuth detail*, 2016, 10 x 6 cm, detail of 3D print.